

By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Whitcomb, Darrel D. *The Rescue of Bat 21*. Naval Institute Press, 118 Maryland Ave., Annapolis, MD 21402. 1998. 196 pp. Ill. \$27.95.

On 2 April 1972, a U.S. Air Force EB-66C electronic countermeasures aircraft, code-named "Bat 21," was shot down during the opening stages of the massive North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam. Of its six-man crew, only 53-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton, the navigator, ejected and survived on the ground in hostile territory for the next 11 days. A highly specialized aircraft and crew, this EB-66C was scouting for enemy surface-to-air missile sites.

When the regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) punched through the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams that Easter weekend, U.S. unit strength was low. In an effort to give the war back to the South Vietnamese, the Americans had pulled most of their people and much of their hardware back to Japan,

Thailand or the U.S. Thus, when the NVA steam-rolled down Highway 1, the U.S. had to scramble to shore up the faltering South Vietnamese forces.

The loss of Bat 21 and its crew touched off one of the most intense, complex and costly rescue efforts of the war, perhaps in the entire U.S. military history. The search and rescue (SAR) philosophy as applied in Vietnam was simple: no effort would be spared to retrieve downed aircrewmembers, no matter how far into enemy territory.

A decorated USAF pilot who flew many of the types of missions he describes, the author has written a well-researched account of this operation. The SAR effort ultimately involved every U.S. service, as well as many South Vietnamese people and units. It cost men and machines and strained interservice relations. It was the stuff of legends and has generated many magazine articles and books, as well as the 1988 movie *Bat 21*.



VT-7 TA-4J Photo by Ted Carlson

As Whitcomb's narrative proceeds, there is actually little specifically about Lt. Col. Hambleton except for an occasional "check" on his status. After these periodic windows, the story quickly returns to the experiences of the crews who flew hundreds of sorties supporting the mission to find the downed navigator. USAF forward air controllers are at the center point of the often frustrating operation as they desperately try to find Hambleton amid the jungles and threatening enemy units.

Other planes are shot down, other men die or join Hambleton on the ground as evaders. Navy and Marine Corps aviators, sea-air-land team members (SEALs) and grunts gradually become involved and, ultimately, a Navy SEAL and his Vietnamese counterpart rescue Hambleton.

The SEAL was awarded the Medal of Honor and the Vietnamese soldier received the Navy Cross.

This book details the in-depth planning, interservice meetings, recurring concerns and the incredible fortitude of the rescuers that finally resulted in the rescue of Bat 21's only survivor. Recently, we've seen several excellent publications that describe the Vietnam experience, putting that painful war in proper historical perspective. Darrel Whitcomb's fine book adds to the growing number of such accounts.

